

Muhammad Iqbal: Islam, the West, and the Quest for a Modern Muslim Identity

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Abstract

Using one major poem of Allama Muhammad Iqbal, the Muslim poet-philosopher, this essay discusses Iqbal's view of the colonial West and his emphasis on Islam as an alternative world system.

Allama¹ Muhammad Iqbal was born in Sialkot, present day Pakistan, on November 9, 1877. He received his early education at Scotch Mission College (now Murray College) and then moved to Lahore to study English literature, Arabic and Philosophy at Government College Lahore. Having finished his Masters, Iqbal left for Europe in 1905 for advanced graduate studies. In London he studied at Lincoln's Inn to qualify for the Bar and also enrolled as an undergraduate at Trinity College. During the same time he also submitted a dissertation to Munich University and was granted a doctorate. During his early education his main influence came from Maulvi² Mir Hassan, a teacher of Persian literature at Scotch Mission College, while at Government College Lahore Iqbal benefited from the personal attention of Thomas Arnold, a renowned orientalist of his time³.

¹ Allama is not a part of Iqbal's name but is traditionally used as an honorific with the names of scholars both in Persian and Urdu.

² A Maulvi literally means someone who teaches the Islamic academic subjects such as the Qur'an, Arabic, and all other subjects dealing with the Islamic way of life. In India and Pakistan Maulvi is also used as an appellation for someone who leads the daily prayers in the mosque.

³ Hafeez Malik, and Lynda Malik, "The Life of the Poet-Philosopher." *Iqbal: Poet-Philosopher of Pakistan*. Hafeez Malik. Ed (New York: Columbia University Press, 1971), pp. 3-20.

It is impossible to cover the vast scope and philosophical depth of Iqbal's works in one essay. Even Anne Marie Schimmel, the most prominent western scholar on Iqbal, admits that "it is difficult to build up a system from Iqbal's works."⁴ The mere scope of his work⁵ makes it impossible to give any definitive explanation of his thoughts or interests. This essay, therefore, only deals with Iqbal's views of the politics of the West and his articulation of the idea of Muslim particularity within the context of British India.

Iqbal, as Anne Marie Schimmel informs us, was born "the very year that Aligarh [University] was beginning to function".⁶ He matures into a poet after his predecessors have already developed a tradition of critiquing the loyalists policies of Muslim League, in a Muslim India that has already witnessed the Balkan War and the Italian invasion of Tripoli. This is also the time when the Muslim cultural center has shifted to Lahore. This is the Lahore that Iqbal enters to study at Government College. Hafeez and Lynda Malik describe this cultural milieu as follows:

In the last decade of the nineteenth century a *Musha'ra* (poetical symposium) was regularly organized in the Bazaar Hakiman inside Bhati Gate of the walled city of Lahore. . . . Bhati Gate was then the center of Lahore's intellectual and cultural activities. Students of local colleges often came, sometimes to enjoy the recitation of poetry, sometimes to compete as budding poets. Iqbal was . . . lured to the poetical symposia of Bhati Gate.⁷

This was the popular space where Iqbal was first publicly recognized for his poetical talent. Iqbal's poetry is, therefore, from its very beginning linked to the public. Lahore being a majority Muslim city and the Urdu emphasis of the *Musha'ra* in itself makes Iqbal into the

⁴ Anne Marie Schimmel, *Islam in the Indian Subcontinent* (Lahore: Sang-e-Meel, 2003), p. 229.

⁵ Iqbal's poetical works alone include four volumes of Urdu verse and seven volumes of Persian poetry, a total of 1720 pages of print.

⁶ Schimmel p. 223.

⁷ Hafeez and Lynda Malik p. 11.

popular voice of his people, the Muslims. These early experiences define Iqbal of the future: a poet constantly in conversation with his people, a poet attempting to retrieve a Muslim self to counter the overwhelming ideological onslaught of the West. It is this public imperative that forces Iqbal to articulate a peculiar view about the West and prompts a deep introspective study of Islam itself. It is within these two important points of reference that the idea of Muslim particularity takes shape in Iqbal's works. About Iqbal's views on the West, Khalifa Abdul Hakim⁸ suggests "This tendency to criticize the West is so deeply embedded in Iqbal's thoughts that in so many of his poems, even if it is completely out of place, he will insert one odd critical strike to the West⁹.

Iqbal, thus, takes it upon himself to complicate the benevolent view of the West, by highlighting the darker aspects of European colonialism. It is this challenge to the West's claim to a civilizational and moral superiority that comes across as his complete distrust of the West. It is, however, important to note that Iqbal's view of Europe and the West is not simply binaristic. For him the question is not that of choosing between the East and West but rather to find a middle ground where Muslims do not have to abandon their Islamic identity to be part of the modern world. He, however, does offer his version of the Islamic system not just as an alternative for Muslims but also for their colonial masters.

Iqbal places the East and West under two competing registers: East is the world of *man*, heart, while the West is the world of *tan*, body. Also the driving force of the East is *Ishq*, love, while the main driving force of the West is *aql*, the intellect. It is within this combination of *man+ishq* and *tan+aql* that Iqbal discusses most of the East-West issues. What is important about this particular description is that within this divide, Iqbal can posit a claim of the East's contribution to the West, for unless a civilization possesses both sets of values, it is not a viable

⁸ All citations from Khalifa Abdul Hakim's Urdu work are in my translation.

⁹ Khalifa Abdul Hakim, *Fikr-e-Iqbal* [Iqbal's Thought] (Lahore: Bazm-e-Iqbal, 1988), p. 201.

civilization for the modern world. Strategically this philosophical stance allows Iqbal to make the East-West exchange a reciprocal one in which both can share their core values to create a better world. This division of internal and external attributes also allows Iqbal to create room for offering an alternative world-view. Iqbal, therefore, does not seek the Muslim response to the British within the private realm but by articulating and foregrounding the importance of Islam and *Ummah*¹⁰ as a political system. This focus on the *Ummah* also had its material reasons, which Francis Robinson explains as follows:

The reasons for this expanding vision were, of course, many: the impact of colonial rule; the realization that the encroachment of the West was an experience being shared by almost all Muslims; the increasing ease with which Muslims were able to travel to be with Muslims in other lands; the need to find a sense of identity as they grappled with the meaning of the modern state in colonial form.¹¹

For Iqbal the Muslim future does not just depend on gaining Western knowledge but also by balancing this knowledge against their own tradition. Iqbal's own work displays this engagement with the West: it is always mediated through his knowledge of both these civilization systems. The categories of *man+ishq* and *tan+aql* become a litmus test for including certain aspects of Europe into the Eastern thought; so if some Western philosopher or leader displays an understanding of the concept of *man+ishq*, then he, somehow, inhabits the spirit of the East and can be included as an honorary member of the world of the heart¹². It

¹⁰ *Ummah* is the concept of Muslim universal community. According to its classical definition, all Muslims, regardless of their place of abode or nation, belong to one single community called the *Ummah*.

¹¹ Francis Robinson, "Technology and Religious Change: Islam and the Impact of Print."

Modern Asian Studies, Vol. 27, No. 1 (Feb., 1993): p. 243.

¹² A good example of this is Iqbal's respect for Thomas Arnold to whom he dedicated his PhD dissertation.

is also within this division, sometimes, that Iqbal seeks true freedom from the constraints of imperialism and convention. Here is how he broaches this subject in one of his *ghazals* from *Baal-e-Jibreel*¹³:

The world of heart is a world of feeling and passion
The world of body is a world of profit, loss and treachery
When you have the world of heart, it cannot be lost
The world of body is like a shadow, here now and then gone
In the world of heart I never encountered the raj of *Afrangi*¹⁴
In the world of heart I never found the Sheikh and Brahmin¹⁵.

Here Iqbal is not attempting to privilege the private sphere over the public sphere: his Muslim hero is a man of action and a man of the world, but his approach to the world is non-materialistic. According to Iqbal, it is through love and through a focus on one's inner self that man can achieve the absolute form of freedom. If one were to focus on strengthening one's spiritual self, then one will neither be worried about the political power of the *Afrangi* nor the religious control of the clergy. Hence, the Sheikh—representing the Muslim clergy—and the Brahmin—that for Hindus—will have no sway over a person who defines life from within. With this brief discussion of Iqbal's basic view of the Muslim self, I will now briefly discuss one of his most comprehensive poems about the West.

Written in 1936, the poem entitled *Iblees Ki Majlis-e-Shura* [The Parliament of Satan] is a scathing criticism of the major socio-political and economic systems offered by the West. The poem's immediate historical context is extremely important: It is written after the First World War and the Russian revolution. In the Islamic world, the Caliphate has been abolished and Mustafa Kemal has already put Turkey

¹³ In my translation.

¹⁴ *Afrangi* or *farangi* is the most frequently used Persian word for the Europeans.

¹⁵ Muhammad Iqbal, *Kulyat-e-Iqbal: Urdu* [Iqbal's Collected Works: Urdu] (Lahore: Mahmood Siddiquallah, 1972), p. 323.

on a secular path. Within the context of Indian politics, the All India Muslim League has been revived by Muhammad Ali Jinnah and despite its recent electoral losses, it is considered a major Muslim political party. In his own life, Iqbal is reaching the end of his illustrious career and he has already expressed, in 1930, his vision of a future Muslim homeland.

The poem is organized as a discussion between Satan and his advisors. While Satan boasts of his accomplishments, his advisors remind him of various threats to his system. Satan refutes all their claims about the troubles one by one but then speculates about the possibility of one final threat. This threat that could undo Satan's whole empire is the resurgence of Islam. In the process of this discussion, Iqbal brings up all the major challenges—mostly Western systems—to Satan's world-system and it is in these challenges that Iqbal articulates the bankruptcy of various Western systems of governance and socio-economic control. The poem starts with a self-congratulatory statement by Satan:

I showed the *Farangi* the dream of kingship
I broke the spell of the Church and the mosque
I taught the poor the lesson of fate
I gave the rich the madness of capitalism
Who can douse this raging fire
That blazes with the vigor of *Iblees*¹⁶.

Here, Satan is speaking of the existing world: a world already arranged according to his design¹⁷. The system that he has created includes all the major accomplishments of humankind: the systems of government, the religions, and people's place in this system. The Urdu/Persian term used for Kingship is *Malikiyat*, which means a system of absolute monarchy and Satan claims it as his own. He also claims having destroyed the love

¹⁶ Ibid p. 647.

¹⁷ *Iblees*, Satan, in Iqbal is always a dynamic character and not just represented as the evil Satan. He posses all major qualities expected of human except obedience to God's will. He is therefore lost in the wilderness of his own making, but he is defiant and proud.

for any metaphysical explanation of reality, hence the Western emphasis on secularism. But this rationalism has not eliminated, at least in the Muslim world, a belief in fate, in predestination, which is an ideal tool for keeping the poor locked in their place. Thus, wherever necessary the poor are kept resigned to their fate while the rich are imbued with greed to produce wealth, mostly for their own good. This world that Satan has created—the world as it exists—depends on systems that keep humankind divided and sundered from God, and is, therefore, an ideal world for the work of Satan.

Upon this declaration of Satan, his first adviser agrees with him and provides evidence in favor of Satan's declaration. Most of the supporting evidence provided comes from the Muslim world. This system, the adviser suggests, has made the Sufis and Mullahs¹⁸ into spokespersons of kings: it is because the Sufis teach people an impractical withdrawal from the world and the Mullah's, in Iqbal's views, teach people about the doctrine of *taqdeer*, fate that cannot be altered. The adviser's final words about the Muslims declare that the current state of Islam is ideal for the Satan's system because "Their Swords have rusted/and Jihad has been forbidden."¹⁹ Then the second adviser, a skeptic, asks of the first: "Is it good or bad, this noise about the rule of the people/or are you not aware of the new troubles of the world?"²⁰ The First adviser replies:

I know but my knowledge of the world tells me
There is no danger if it is another form of *Malukiyat*
We have ourselves garbed kingship in a popular dress
When Humans became a little self-aware
Haven't you seen the popular system of the West?

¹⁸ *Mullah* literally means someone who leads the daily prayers, but in Iqbal, it also has a negative connotation of a literalist and less informed religious leader.

¹⁹ Iqbal, *Kulyat* p. 649

²⁰ *ibid*

Bright-faced with a heart darker than Changez²¹.

The last two verses refer to the rise of democracy in the west, which the Satan's advisor sees as a potent threat to the satanic system. The reply by the first advisor resonates with Iqbal's own views about Western democracy. Iqbal elsewhere calls democracy "the same old organ/imbued with the tune of kings."²² Within this poem, it is evident that there is no threat to the "Satanic system" from this privileging of the masses, for this particular form of democracy is another form of Kingship whose essence is darker than its appearance. Iqbal justifies this dark aspect of Western democracy under two registers: capitalism and lack of a religious spirit. In Khalifa Abdul Hakim's words, "Iqbal is ambivalent about Western democracy"²³. He further explains that in Iqbal's views: "The true democracy was represented by early Islam, in which there was no ruling class and the state was a welfare state."²⁴ The reason the existent Western democracy cannot be a threat to Satan's power is because it has failed to eliminate class and has normalized the elite privilege in the name of the people.

Then the third advisor brings up yet another new development of the West. He says:

But what's the answer to the mischief of that wise Jew
That Moses without light, that cross-less Jesus
Not a prophet, but with a book under his arm
For what could be more dangerous than this
That the surfs uproot the tents of their masters.²⁵

²¹ Ibid p. 649-50.

²² Ibid p. 261.

²³ Khalifa Abdul Hakim, *Islam and Communism* (Lahore: Institute of Islamic Culture, 1969) p. 281.

²⁴ Ibid p. 287.

²⁵ Iqbal. *Kulyat*, p. 650.

This is obviously a reference to Karl Marx. We are now being given the second major alternative from the West: as opposed to the class-divided capitalistic society, this alternative involves the destruction of the masters at the hands of the people. Certainly, this could destroy the inherent duplicity of the capitalistic democracy. Iqbal's views on Marx and socialism are also quite ambivalent: He finds Marx's message revolutionary and closest to teachings of Islam, but is opposed to its lack of spirituality. For Iqbal writing God out of history and replacing it with material explanation of the world is inconsistent with Islam. Khalifa Abdul Hakim suggests:

This is the difference between Marx and Iqbal; both are out for revolution but one wants to achieve it through hatred and the other through love. One says: Arise the workers of the world, to shatter this sorry scheme of things. . . . Iqbal says, Arise, ye the rich and the poor alike, and realise your real selves through love²⁶.

Thus, Iqbal appropriates Marx to highlight the exploitative role of capitalism but imbues his socialistic ideas with an Islamic spirit. Marx's influence on Iqbal, however, is undeniable and becomes obvious in many of his poems. Some of his Persian poems about workers in *Payam-e-Mashriq* [A Message From the East] are obviously Marxist in their tone. In one such poem, "Division between the Capitalist and the Labourer" Iqbal describes their differences as follows:

Mine is the din of steel factory,
And yours is the church organ's melody
The earth and what is in its bowels are mine;
From earth to heaven, all is your territory²⁷. (176)

Hence, despite his ambivalence about Marxism, Iqbal finds its socialistic message much more acceptable to the class hierarchies of capitalism.

²⁶ Abdul Hakim, *Islam and p. 122*

²⁷ Muhammad Iqbal, *A Message From the East* [Payam-e-Mashriq]. 1924.
Trans. M. Hadi Hussain (Lahore: Iqbal Academy, 1977), p. 176.

However, in the poem another of Satan's advisors sees no threat in the new message of the Jewish prophet, for in his words; "We have found its answer in the palaces of Rome/Where Caesar's people are dreaming of Caesar again.²⁸" For this advisor of Satan, then, fascism is a good enough defense against the threat of Marxism, especially if espoused by a people who intend to replicate what they consider their ancient heritage. But the parliament is not convinced of this answer and that is when another advisor asks Satan for his definitive opinion. Satan then gives a long reply, parts of which I will discuss below. He first declares: "I am not afraid of these socialist gypsies/these itinerant, mercurial one's don't bother me.²⁹" But I do fear the *Ummah* of Islam. And this is where Iqbal, in Satan's words, inserts the problems and possibilities of the Muslim *Ummah*:

I know this *Ummah* no longer holds the Qur'an
The same capitalism is Muslim's faith.
In the pith-dark night of the East
The hands of the clergy are void of light³⁰.
But the currents of present make me fear
That the message of the prophet might appear again.³¹

The Muslims of the present lack all attributes to cause a universal upheaval and have lost their connection to the Qur'an—their source of wisdom—and their religious elite is not enlightened itself. But chances are that someone might rekindle the light and initiate the system of the prophet. That is what Satan fears. He describes this system of the prophet as follows:

²⁸ Iqbal, *Kulyat* p. 651.

²⁹ Ibid p. 654.

³⁰ Iqbal uses the Persian term *Yad-e-baiza*, the glowing hand. In the Islamic tradition, the glowing hand was one of the miracles of Moses, who after an audience with God could raise his glowing hand as a testimony of God's confidence in him.

³¹ Iqbal, *Kulyat* p. 654.

Protector of women's honor, tester of men
A message of death for all sorts of slavery
Undivided amongst kings and beggars
Cleans the wealth of all its filth
Makes the rich the custodians of riches
What could be greater than this revolution?
Not to kings but to God belongs the land.³²

This is Islam's classless society where there is no ownership of land, rather there is custodianship. This subtle difference between classical Marxian approach to property and that of Islam is one revolutionary concept that Iqbal also explained elsewhere in his works. In another poem from *Bal-e-Jibrel* Iqbal asserts: "In God's name this land is neither yours nor mine/Neither it is of your ancestors or mine."³³ The poem is entitled "Al ard lillah" which is a verse of the Qur'an meaning the land is of God's. Hence, in Iqbal's view the rich cannot own the land, but may hold it as a trust and those who work the land have the first right on its bounty. Obviously, Satan is threatened by this system, for if ownership could be abolished by the word of God then the whole edifice of an economy of ownership will collapse.

In his final message, Satan declares that whatever the Muslims are entangled in at the present must be perpetuated so that they do not arise and topple his carefully built system. Here are some of the things that he suggests are meant to keep the Muslims in their current pliant state:

Better he remains entangled in the Mysteries of Godhead
In various interpretations of the Book of God
Keep him ignorant of the world of character
Until all his pawns are taken in the game of life
Keep him busy in the problems of day-to-day
Mould his moods to the temperament of Shrines.³⁴

³² Ibid 655.

³³ Ibid p. 119.

³⁴ Ibid 657.

What Satan suggests as a remedy to keep the Muslim threat at bay are in fact the very aspects of Islam that Iqbal—and many other religious reformers—considered the main ills of Islam of their time. Iqbal is invoking two extreme problems of Islam of his time: over-intellectualization of faith at the hands of Muslim philosophers and ritualization of Islam caused by the mystics. Both these aspects of Islam had taken away the dynamism of Islam and replaced it with detached pedantry and superstitious rituals. For Satan for as long as Muslims remained divided on the question of interpretation of the Qur'an instead of embodying its dynamic spirit, they will never be capable of challenging his system. Similarly, the Sufi shrines also encouraged a withdrawal from real-life and replaced it with detached spiritual ritual, hence becoming an ideal system for replacing Muslim dynamic spirit with a sacralized ineptitude and invocation of fate to explain material realities. Iqbal was not opposed to all branches of Sufism but only to a certain kind of it. Iqbal's philosophical view about Islam is dynamic. He believes: "Islam. . . says 'yes' to the world of matter and points the way to master it with a view to discover a basis for a realistic regulation of life.³⁵" Any Sufi practices that suggested a withdrawal from the world of action to an uncontested belief in fate were, to Iqbal, against the dynamic spirit of Islam.

Iqbal also makes it a point to write about the inherent brutalities of the western power and knowledge paradigm. In this branch of his critique of the West, the use of modern technologies of violence in the First World War forms an important backdrop. In one of his poems entitled "The Wisdom of the West" included in *Payam-e-Mahriq*, Iqbal touches on the modern technologies of violence employed by the West. The poem includes the lament of a man who has died and is complaining to God about the manner of his death. His main complaint is that the Angel of Death is no longer at his best and needs new training. The man requests God to send the Angel of Death to the West for training. He says:

³⁵ Muhammad Iqbal, *Muslim Political Thought: A Reconstruction*. 1930. Ed. Fateh Muhammad Malik (Lahore: Alhamra, 2002), p. 16.

The West develops wonderful new skills
In this as in so many other fields
Its submarines are crocodiles
Its bombers rain destruction from the skies
Its gasses so obscure the sky
They blind the sun's world-seeing eye.
Dispatch this old fool to the West
To learn the art of killing fast—and best.³⁶

Iqbal's views on the West show a picture much different from the one presented by the early loyalists such as Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan and Altaf Hussain Hali. Iqbal, a product of the colonial system, does not only critique the west from the place of the native alone; his critique of the West comes from within the Western philosophies of self representation. In such a critique Western liberal democracy's class hierarchies and wealth distribution is exposed. Similarly Marxism faces its own critique in its extreme focus on the material world alone. In Iqbal's views a modern system must offer the best of all other systems, and to him Islam is that true system. The native is not just fighting for or appealing for inclusion in the colonial system; he is, rather, offering his own philosophical and political system as a solution to the problems of the colonial masters.

³⁶ Iqbal, *Paym* pp. 90-91.